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SUBJECT: Prime Minister's vocal support for Coalition intervention in Iraq nets small backlash at home

Refs: (A) SA/INS - Colombo 09/29/03 class e-mail
- (B) Colombo 1688, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's remarks supporting Coalition actions in Iraq during his recent UNGA address have netted a small backlash, with several newspapers criticizing the PM's stand as being too pro-U.S. In discussions, observers had a mixed reaction as to whether the PM would pay a political price at home for his views. At this point, despite the flak, there is every sign that PM Wickremesinghe will continue to steer GSL foreign policy in a direction friendly to the U.S. END SUMMARY.

PM's Statement on Iraq

2. (SBU) Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's comments supporting Coalition actions in Iraq during his September 26 address at the UN General Assembly have sparked a small backlash at home. The speech, which focused mainly on Sri Lanka's peace process and UN structural reforms, included the following reference to Iraq:

"There are members in this hall today who believe passionately that the United States and their allies were wrong to intervene in Iraq. Then there are those of us who feel that the United States and their allies had no choice but to intervene, that the failure of the UN had created the need for a world policeman however reluctant it might be. But Iraq is more than a divergence of views on a major issue. It shows the inadequacies of the present collective security system. A decision-making system which grappled with the issue of Iraq for over a decade without solution and created a deadlock at a most critical time."

A Small Backlash

3. (SBU) The Sri Lankan press initially covered the PM's speech as a straightforward news story, but there were soon rumblings that his comments had gone too far in a pro-U.S. direction. The following two passages from recent editorials are a sampling of this negative reaction:

-- In its September 28 edition, the SUNDAY TIMES, an independent English language weekly, characterized the PM's stance re Iraq as "bold and brazen," and questioned "...will this government also attract unwarranted attention as a lackey-state running after the pot of gold represented by U.S. largesse in the short term, at the expense of her self-respect and international solidarity for a better world in the long term?"

-- In its September 29 edition, THE ISLAND, an independent opposition daily, in an editorial headlined "Sri Lanka as a hireling," stated "...Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in his address to the UN General Assembly on Friday, kicked, well and truly into our own goal by subscribing to the much disputed view that the U.S.-led allies had to invade Iraq faute de mieux. He didn't stop at that. He sought to justify the emergence of a global policeman by blaming it on what he perceived as failure of the UN. The statement was highly uncalled for in that other countries like France and Germany have their reservations about the matter. Why should Sri Lanka commit herself to someone else's war?"

4. (U) Late September 29, the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party issued a statement criticizing the PM's remarks regarding Iraq.

Political Soundings

15. (C) In discussions with emboffs, observers had mixed reactions as to whether Prime Minister Wickremesinghe would pay a political price at home for his views. Reaction included:

-- Jehan Perera, an analyst at the National Peace Council, a local think-tank, told polchief September 30 that he thought the PM would pay a "stiff" political price for his pro-U.S. stance. The Prime Minister, he asserted, had "crossed the line" and become too close to the U.S. Sri Lankans, especially left-wing and Muslim elements, would notice the PM's positioning and react in a highly negative way. Perera said he could not understand why the PM had taken such a friendly view of U.S. intervention in Iraq at UNGA when his government had been more lukewarm earlier in the year in its public pronouncements on the matter. (Note: The GSL's major public statement re the Iraq war issued on March 20 was relatively constructive, but with nuances -- see Reftels. It cited Iraq's failure to disarm and also expressed "confidence" that the coalition would move to minimize any negative impacts the war might have. The statement, however, went on to underscore the central role the UN should play regarding war and peace issues.)

-- Taranjit Sandhu, political counselor at the Indian High Commission, told polchief that he thought the negative press play was indeed indicative of some opposition to the PM's comments within Sri Lanka's body politic. He doubted that such resistance would amount to much, however, given the PM's "strong" political position at home at this time. Elaborating, Sandhu said he did not think most Sri Lankans had noticed the PM's UNGA address in any case -- they remained more focused on the peace process and the local economic situation, and news in these areas was basically positive.

COMMENT

16. (C) Despite the flak he has received at home over his UNGA remarks, there is every sign that PM Wickremesinghe will continue to steer GSL foreign policy in a direction friendly to the U.S. As reported previously, the Prime Minister appears to have made a determination quite early in his tenure that he wanted a closer relationship with the U.S. than that maintained by the previous government. His comments at UNGA and Sri Lanka's recent helpfulness at Cancun on trade issues were only the latest and the most public examples of this long-standing policy, which included signing an ICC Article 98 agreement with the U.S. in November 2002. As flagged above, in spite of the editorials, we do not think his pro-U.S. "tilt" will cause him many problems. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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